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ABSTRACT

Since 1947, public community colleges have grown faster than any other sector of higher education. Despite the dynamism of the community college movement, the early 1980's saw the beginning of a period of financial retrenchment, fear of declining enrollments, and skepticism about the future. From 1983 through 1987, the number of associate degrees awarded by community colleges declined by 9 percent. In addition, the influx of underprepared students during this period forced community colleges to improve their planning, and to try new approaches to remediation and occupational preparation. To address the decline in the numbers of traditional college-age youths, many community colleges have turned recruitment efforts towards adults, signed training agreements with local employers, and initiated federally-funded job training programs for the unemployed. In addition, colleges have expanded their career programs, and sought articulation agreements with four-year institutions to encourage the success of transfer-oriented students. Changes in faculty in two-year colleges have included more faculty with doctoral degrees, greater numbers of part-time instructors, and more women and minorities in teaching and administrative positions. With cuts in state and federal resources for higher education in the 1980's, the "open-door" policy of community colleges has come under fire. In response, colleges have undertaken student outcomes studies to demonstrate program successes, while increasing their assessment and remediation efforts. As financially efficient institutions, community colleges should receive the funding they need to continue their role as a critical segment of higher education. (29 references) (PAA)

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Community Colleges: Making Winners Out of Ordinary People

by
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COMMUNITY COLLEGES: MAKING WINNERS OUT OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

Leslie Koltai

The modern community college movement in the United States is now entering its sixth decade. The 45 years since World War II have witnessed its coming of age, and recent decades has seen community colleges take their place alongside four-year colleges and universities as clearly recognized institutions of postsecondary education. Since the 1947 publication of *Higher Education for Democracy*--the highly influential six-volume report of the President's Commission on Higher Education appointed by President Truman--public community colleges have grown faster than any other sector of higher education: Their numbers have more than doubled, and their enrollment has increased by a factor of 20. Today, they serve fully one-third of the students in American higher education and employ over a third of American college and university faculty.

Community colleges have experienced significant success as well as growth over the past four and one-half decades. They provide low-cost but high-quality postsecondary opportunities for a broad array of clients, from first-generation college students to working adults and senior citizens. They are the major point of entry into

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Credit Line

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higher education for America's low-income youth, underrespresented ethnic minorities, and new immigrants. They serve students of all ages who want to earn academic degrees as well as nontraditional students seeking specific skills in nondegree programs. And more than any other postsecondary sector, they have strong links to their communities, responding to local needs and interests in a manner and to an extent not seen in local public or private four-year colleges, proprietary schools, or research universities.

Changes in the 1980s

Despite the dynamism of the public community college movement, the early 1980s saw the end of its era of ready money, rapid expansion, and visionary dreams, and the beginning of a period of financial retrenchment, fear of declining enrollments, and skepticism about the future. During the decade, demographic changes--including a radical shift in student profiles and an influx of underprepared students--forced community colleges to improve their planning, give greater clarity to their expectations, rethink their bifurcated mission of transfer education and career development, and try new approaches to remediation, occupational preparation, and accountability. Their growth rate fell dramatically. While their enrollment had increased by almost 200 percent in the decade from 1966 through 1976--from 1.317 million to 3.939 million, it grew by only 19 percent--to 4.703 million--during the next decade (El-Khawas, 1988, p. 7). Similarly, while the number of colleges grew by 82 percent or 465 new institutions between 1966 and 1976--from 565 to 1,030--it grew by only 4 percent or 38 colleges between 1976 and 1986, to a total of 1,068 (ibid., p. 8). Perhaps most significantly, the number of associate degrees that community colleges awarded actually decreased by 9 percent from 1983 through 1987--after having increased by 81 percent between 1971 and 1983.

The major reason for these changes was the large decline during the 1980s in the number of traditional college-age youth and a corresponding drop in the number of high school graduates. America's number of 18-year-olds peaked in 1979 at 4.3 million and since then has plummeted by one-fourth to 3.2 million today. Some observers predicted that because of this drop, community college enrollments would decline during the past decade, but several factors accounted for their increased enrollments. Among them, the number of high school graduates going straight to college rose during the decade--from 50.9 percent in 1980 to 56.5 percent by 1987. In particular, the proportion of women high school graduates attending community college climbed steadily--increasing from 17.0 percent in 1977 to 19.8 percent in 1987 (Alsalam, 1990, p. 16). But the major factor was increased enrollment in career and continuing education of adults beyond traditional college age.

Upgrading the Employed and Retraining the Unemployed

Community colleges turned to the already-employed as a source of students who could benefit from their varied menu of vocational and academic courses to prepare for either changes in existing jobs or moves to new ones. They attracted many adults who wanted to increase their skills to keep up with changes in their fields or advance their careers, as well as other workers who saw their jobs--or, in extreme cases, their entire occupations or companies--disappearing as a result of recession, changing technology, or the loss of the nation's manufacturing base. Many colleges signed cooperative agreements with local employers to upgrade their workers--often at the worksite rather than on campus. Many participated in government-sponsored projects to train the unemployed. And representatives of some colleges in the "rustbelt" eastern states joined envoy teams of municipal economic developers that traveled south and west to visit prospective firms, promising low-cost specialized training of new or existing workers to sweeten the deal of relocating in their region.

Besides the obvious interest of community colleges in occupational education at the two-year level, they had two advantages that other academic institutions lacked in attracting adult students: their accessibility in terms of location, and their convenience in terms of extended classroom hours. With campuses nearby, adults could easily commute to class--and with evening offerings, they could schedule their coursework around their employment schedules. As Arthur Levine noted, community colleges that took into account the need for their students to work full time" were often the "only choice" for working adults (1990, p. 28). Moreover, the willingness of community colleges to provide day care for children of students permitted many single mothers to enroll during day-time hours. By 1985, two out of every three adults who met the federal definition of poverty were women, and more than half America's impoverished families were headed by single mothers (Parnell, 1985, p. 31). Helping such women move from welfare to work became a particular responsibility of two-year colleges.

As a result of these changes in clientele, the average age of community college students rose--from 27 years in 1980 to 29 in 1986. And as age increased, so did the number of part-time students (Cohen and Brawer, 1989, pp. 32-33). By 1988, 37 percent of all community college students were enrolled part-time. According to the *Community College Fact Book*, between 1976 and 1986, the part-time enrollment of women in two-year colleges increased 50 percent, while that of men grew by only 11 percent--so that by 1988, 65 percent of all community college students were women (El-Khawas, 1988, p. 16).

As community colleges sought to prepare their students for as-yet-undefined jobs in an uncertain and shifting work place, they rethought their career programs, making them more responsive to employment trends, employer needs, and student skills. Statistics have indicated that the greatest growth in the nation's job market

into the twenty-first century will not be in occupations requiring a bachelor's degree but in those requiring some education beyond high school--the special province of the community college. As an illustration, *VocEd* Magazine notes that at the Kennedy Space Center, "85 percent of the technical positions require a community college-level education, and only 15 percent require a four-year or higher postsecondary level education" (Long, 1985, p. 48). Among examples of innovative career programs whose graduates have no difficulty finding jobs, the industrial model building program of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay prepares students for positions making architectural models, prototypes for the automotive and toy industry, engineering and legal models, and even special effects for the movie industry ("NWTC Industrial Model Program," 1991, p. 6). And North Carolina's 58-campus community college system has been called a possible model for "putting America back to work" because of its role in changing the state's economic basis from agriculture to high technology manufacturing ("Jobs: Putting America Back to Work," 1982, pp. 78-84).

While expanding their career programs, community colleges have sought to assure "career laddering," through articulating their programs with those of four-year colleges and universities--and even with high schools. The decade of the 1980s saw an increase in the number of community college students who transferred from career programs to universities, despite an overall decrease in community college transfers generally. To encourage transfers by reducing the likelihood of students losing credit and wasting time because of moving from one institution to another, most two-year colleges have instituted transfer alliance programs with four-year institutions--as Alexander Astin recommended in the early part of the decade (1982, p. 192), and Arthur Levine endorsed at the decade's close (1990, p. 176). Recently, they have also re-emphasized ways of helping students achieve an associate degree if

not the baccalaureate, and businesses have been adding the degree to their preferred job qualifications (Cohen and Brawer, 1989, pp. 58 and 215).

Partnerships between two-year colleges and high schools, such as at LaGuardia Community College in New York, have attracted increasing attention and have been established in a number of states to facilitate students' introduction to postsecondary study. Some are occupationally oriented, such as courses of "techprep" study that begin in the junior year of high school and run through the two years of community college or "two-plus-two-plus-two" programs that extend from high school through community college to the baccalaureate. Others are learning-skill oriented, as is one at East Los Angeles College that involves 750 students from two local high schools, two junior high schools, and an elementary school who come to the college on Saturdays during the school year. This program initially concentrated on mathematics and science but now includes English, reading, and writing enrichment. Many of its former students have become teachers and some have work in mathematics- and science-based professions ("East L.A. College," 1991, p. 20)..

Community college enrollments have recently been affected by another factor: the largest wave of immigration in the nation's history that began in the mid-1970s and has involved more than 11.5 million newcomers, more than 95 percent of whom are from Latin and Asian countries. When the United States pulled out of Vietnam, a stream of immigration began from Southeast Asia that has not yet stopped. And from the Latin countries came "freedom flotillas" from Cuba and Haiti and refugees from wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, joining thousands who each year successfully cross the border from Mexico in search of a better life. This influx of new residents, most of whom are in need of English language instruction, and many of whom are unable to read or write in their native languages, has strained the ability

of community support systems, including colleges, to absorb them ("National English Literacy Demonstration Program," 1990, p. 1).

The 1986 federal Immigration Reform and Control Act allowed for the addition of up to 2.5 million permanent residents to the American population, and it allocated funds to help impacted states meet their basic health, education, and citizen needs. Community colleges across the nation expanded their English as a Second Language (ESL) and basic skills programs by means of these federal funds, but the expansion was greatest in the south and southwest, where the weather and job markets attracted Asian immigrants, many of whom relocated there after initially settling in other parts of the country, and where the Spanish influence and language helped Hispanics find ready acceptance. Glendale College in California has offered a model program for these new citizens, providing a ladder of courses beginning with basic English for speakers of other languages and progressing through entry-level college instruction into transfer and vocational programs. But in some states colleges were reimbursed for these basic non-credit courses at only half the rate of credit courses, and in others, federal funds have run out, leaving local communities to pick up the tab for much-needed services.

Because of all of the changes described thus far, today 24 percent of all two-year college enrollments nationwide are ethnic minority students. Community colleges enroll the highest proportion of underrepresented ethnic minorities of any postsecondary sector because of their low cost, their accessibility to commuters, and their open admissions orientation. Levine has noted that all races, including Caucasians, are likely to begin their college careers in public two-year colleges rather than in other institutions, but he reports that this is particularly true of Hispanics, and he observes that the proportion of Black students enrolling in community

colleges has been growing. "In 1980, 40 percent of black undergraduates were in two-year colleges; by 1988, this figure had grown slightly to 43 percent" (1990, p. 77).

In an effort to meet the basic skills needs of entering students, two-year colleges have experimented with a variety of instructional innovations, from mastery learning through electronic technologies. But for financial reasons, many have had to decrease their number of advanced courses or "second-level studies" for the sophomore year in favor of remedial and introductory first-year offerings. Some critics have claimed that community colleges have neglected their responsibilities for transfer, using as evidence the decline in the number of transfers during the 1980s (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1990). But some of this decline has stemmed from changes in the clientele of community colleges and from student interest during the 1980s in gaining job skills for immediate employment. It can be argued that community colleges have suffered unjustifiably by being inappropriately compared with four-year institutions in terms of their student persistence to the baccalaureate degree. For example, in analyzing the "High School and Beyond" study for the federal government, El-Khawas and associates found that far more high school graduates who aspire to a baccalaureate degree enroll in four-year institutions (59 percent) than in community colleges (16 percent) (1988, p. xvi). And Alexander Astin, in studying ethnic minority student persistence to the baccalaureate, attributed part of the low bachelor's degree completion rate for Hispanics and Native American Indians, which is about half that of white students, "to the high concentration of both Hispanics and American Indians in community colleges" (1982, p. 40). Yet for better or worse, community colleges play a larger role than most postsecondary institutions in what Burton Clark called the "cooling out" function of college, whereby students discover disparities between their hope for advanced

degrees and their abilities to pursue these degrees--and as a result lower their educational ambitions (1960).

Research studies that blame low community college transfer rates on the colleges themselves tend to suffer from not adequately considering this "cooling out" function of the two-year institutions. By including within a potential transfer pool of students large numbers of those at community colleges who hope to earn a baccalaureate but neither pursue the necessary courses of study nor achieve the required level of skill, such studies skew the results unfairly against two-year institutions. For example, Alexander McCormick found from a sample of 2,894 from the 12,000 participants in the High School and Beyond study that "the cooling out" not only persists but "appears strongest for those with the highest expectations regardless of ability" (1990, p. 14). He argues that studies of student persistence, both within an institution and in transfers between institutions, should take into account not only student expectations but student skills. Otherwise, he concludes, persistence studies are not informative in terms of understanding "students' negotiation of the higher education system," especially with respect to students' lowering of expectations for the bachelor's or higher degree (1990, pp. 1-2). For such reasons, some researchers have begun to call for a clearer definition of such terms as "transfer student" and "transfer rate," and common data elements to facilitate analysis of transfer.

Changes in Faculty Characteristics

An encouraging change during the 1980s among community college faculty has been a decline in the proportion who have looked on two-year college teaching as a job of last resort because of a lack of faculty vacancies in four-year colleges and universities. Increasingly, community college faculty members have prepared for this work as a career goal rather than as a stepping-stone to a university professorship. Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer write: "as a group, faculty

members no longer look to the universities for their ideas on curriculum and instruction, nor do they see community colleges only as stations on their way to university careers. Community college instruction has become a career in its own right. Its flowering but awaits a more fully developed professional consciousness on the part of its practitioners" (1989, p. 90).

With this change has come increased interest among new faculty members in student assessment, placement, and the measurement of student outcomes, since these faculty have a clear commitment to meet the needs of community college students and are better trained for that pursuit. At the same time, "increasing numbers of instructors are obtaining doctoral degrees prior to employment or soon thereafter .... While 16 percent of the humanities instructors had doctorates in 1975, the percentage had increased to 23 by 1983. Among all liberal arts instructors, the percentage had increased to 27 (Cohen and Brawer, 1987, p. 68).

Countering this trend toward a more committed faculty is the continued use of large numbers of part-time instructors:

> Between 1976 and 1986 the number of part-time faculty increased by 47 percent, compared to a 26 percent increase in the number of full-timers and a 36 percent increase in the size of the administrative and professional staff. The use of part-time faculty is a firmly established and growing practice at community, junior, and technical colleges. (El-Khawas, 1988, p. xviii)

Indeed, until community colleges are better funded, they will continue to employ disproportionate numbers of part-time faculty as a means to balancing their budgets while providing the small classes and individualized instruction required by their student population.

Another change evident during the 1980s was further diversification of two-year college faculty and staff. Increased numbers of women and ethnic minorities as faculty members and administrator of two-year colleges offer much-needed role models to many women and ethnic minority students on campus. Among efforts to this end, the League for Innovation in the Community College began its nation-wide "Leaders for the 80s" project in 1980 with a focus on developing more women community college administrators; and since then offshoots of the national project have been organized in California, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin (Goodwin, 1988, p. 10).

Changes in the Fiscal Environment

The passage of Proposition 13 in California in 1978 signalled the beginning of a tax revolt that sent shockwaves throughout the nation, since California--considered a bellwether state--appeared to face a multitude of many tough decisions between imposing user fees or cutting back on such services as non-credit community education and classes for senior citizens and the disabled. By the early 1980s, community colleges in other states had cut back on classes, services, and faculty development. in response to lack of funding. "With the advent of the 1980s," wrote Richard L. Alfred, director of the Community College Program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, "community colleges have felt the pressures of changing state and federal requirements guiding the allocation of resources, and the era of laissez faire leadership has ceased" (1984, p. 8).

At the start of the decade, economists David Breneman and Susan Nelson argued that the most serious obstacle to a resolution of the tension between the expansive mission of community colleges and their shrinking financial base involved "the mission, not the finance of community college activities." With a mission that attempted to be "all things to all people," community colleges, according to Breneman

and Nelson, had failed to justify the costs they deemed necessary for their operations (1981, p. 54).

By 1986, a community college vice president commented:

> The most hallowed tradition of the community or junior college, the "open door," is under attack. Along with scores of other criticisms of education, a persistent questioning of the venerable open-door tradition has been evident and growing in the 1980s. And why not? Questions about the open door bring into focus two very popular concerns: standards of excellence and fiscal responsibility. As financial resources shrink, can the community college continue to justify excessive expenditures on high-risk students? As the taxpayer grows more dissatisfied with the quality of public education, can the community college continue to hope that educational exposure on a broad scale will produce enough success to justify continuation, or must it now ensure the quality of its service and the quality of its produce? (Nigliazzo, 1986, p. 33)

Community colleges have responded in a variety of ways to ensure quality. Their policy makers have focused more clearly on their institutions' missions of vocational and transfer education in order to answer legislators' and others' concerns about how well the colleges are fulfilling those missions. Some colleges have sponsored public opinion surveys to assess community attitudes--among them, the five two-year colleges in western North Carolina that used a comprehensive survey to determine public perceptions of their programs, services, and effectiveness in meeting community needs, as well as the value of education and training ("Telephone Survey," 1990). And most colleges have begin to locate other potential sources of money to fund their activities than government funds. As late as 1988, private gifts and endowments accounted for only 1 percent of total revenues of the average college

(ElKhawas, 1988, p. xvii), but since then community colleges have increased their links to the business community through contract education and sought contributions from corporations, foundations, and local philanthropists. In Mississippi, Meridian Community College had created a nationally recognized model technology transfer program in partnership with a local electronics company, with funds supplemented by the Job Training Partnership Act as well as $75,000 in company contributions for employee training ("Mississippi College, 1990, p. 7). In California, the Economic Development Network of the California Community Colleges has used $6.31 million to leverage $11.05 million in contributions from private sector partners, local and other state agencies, and other special projects (Board of Governors, 1991).

Another means to improve the funding for two-year institutions has come through the presentation to funding agencies of hard data demonstrating student outcomes and successes. Offices of institutional research have become increasingly common on community college campuses as administrators have sought to demonstrate successful practices. Miami-Dade Community College in Florida has been especially well known for its integration of institutional research into institutional decision making. In California, Santa Barbara City College and Rancho Santiago College have outstanding research staffs who collect and analyze data on students in order to document program success. California's Legislature has mandated that community colleges upgrade and expand their student assessment efforts as part of a "matriculation" program that also involves student counseling and follow-up in order to improve student achievement. That program is an example of concern both for student welfare and for the investment that the state's taxpayers are asked to make in higher education. Rather than imposing restrictive admission requirements, California's community colleges are adhering to their long-standing open-door policy of admitting at-risk students, including high school dropouts, and giving them the

opportunity to demonstrate their abilities by "challenging" course prerequisites. At the same time, they recognize the need for better guidance as students select their courses, and the matriculation program was a natural response to this need. It not only allows for better advisement of students as they make their course selections, but also provides policy makers with a wealth of data concerning the results of student assessment, placement, and instruction procedures. In short, the demand of funding agencies for evidence of results is leading to the development of programs that are clearly related to students' educational needs.

Challenges for the Future

Changes buffeting community colleges during the past decade were summarized by Robert H. McCabe, president of Miami-Dade, in his statement:

> The accelerated evolution in our society over the past three decades parallels the most significant era of growth and development for the American community college. During the brief history of the community college movement, public attitudes toward social programs have seen some dramatic shifts. Today, the feeling that social programs have not worked, that there is too much government regulation, and that people should do more for themselves is strong. Yet, the problems of urban areas and minority populations have not lessened. Rather, the changing requirements for literacy in an information age and the stress of the substantial transitions that society is undergoing have caused already severe problems to deepen. Any public institution, especially one as closely tied to the needs of society as the community college, will also find itself deeply immersed in transition (1984, p. 44).

Community colleges will continue to face the problems of recent years into the coming century. A look at the enrollments of America's elementary and secondary schools give a glimpse of tomorrow's students, who are very much like today's students, only more so. Minority enrollments will continue to increase. Underpreparedness in the basic skills will not abate. Elementary and secondary schools will face the same budget cutbacks, overcrowding, and increasingly outmoded equipment and buildings as postsecondary institutions; and while many students in the schools grapple with learning English skills, they will continue to fall behind in other subjects, such as mathematics, science, and literature.

In the area of student enrollments, there is a need to focus on serious students both in the area of transfer education and career education. Hopefully, clarification of the dual mission of community colleges for occupational preparation and transfer education will help to address the serious vocational students as well as their transfer-bound colleagues. Community college leaders must recognize and resolve the challenge presented by the need for additional remedial and basic skills courses, especially when increases in this part of the curriculum come at the expense of more advanced sophomore-level courses. Otherwise fewer well-prepared, first-time college students fresh out of high school will choose to attend two-year colleges than they did a decade ago, if they have other options open to them.

The American community colleges have become increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic representation, and there is no reason to expect this pattern to change in the coming years. College leaders, therefore, must consider the potential changes needed on campus to meet the needs of an ever-changing student body. The curriculum, for example, has been a focal point over the past several years, with community college faculty members among the leaders nationwide calling for a multicultural curriculum. Among the leaders in this movement, San Juan College in New Mexico

"has developed programs that serve the needs of its minority students that are not necessarily tailored to the needs of a specific minority group . . . . " (Henderson, 1989).

At the same time, ethnic minority representation among the faculty and staff has only slowly increased, and many observers have pointed to the need for greater efforts to feed the pipeline from undergraduate to baccalaureate to graduate study so that community colleges can begin to hire more ethnic minority administrators and faculty members. Both of these issues, however, carry the potential for controversy on campus. Community college leaders need to be prepared to respond. They must take the lead in ensuring that both the curriculum and the college staff reflect the contributions of traditionally underrepresented groups, foster a campus community that tolerates and respects diversity, and facilitate the delivery of both vocational and transfer education in an intellectually lively environment.

While the community colleges serve as the educational entry point to postsecondary education for millions of low-income students and immigrants, they have not yet received from state or federal funding sources the funds they need. El-Khawas notes that "in spite of the historically unparalleled growth in both number of institutions and students enrolled, many educational and governmental leaders continue to overlook the critical importance and scale of this sector" (1988, p. xv). Leaders within the four-year higher education circles have been slow to recognize the service community colleges have provided for them. In taking responsibility for remedial education, for basic skills training, and for specialized learning skills acquisition, the community colleges have provided pre-collegiate education for hundreds of thousands of students who would otherwise seek a place in baccalaureate institutions ill-equipped to meet their needs. By providing vocational and career education, as well as transfer education, the community colleges prepare these students for job opportunities or transfer. Indeed, the institutions have moved well beyond the -

secondary status they held in the early part of this century and are ready to receive the position of financial security they need in order to continue to play that vital role.

The *Community College Fact Book* states that "community colleges represent a financially efficient segment of higher education, educating 43 percent of the nation's undergraduates for a disproportionately small share of state and federal higher education monies" (El-Khawas, 1988, xviii). While a majority of all entering freshmen begin their collegiate studies at community colleges, and while state funds account for 50 percent of community college revenues, two-year colleges receive only 19 percent of state funds for high education and less than 10 percent of federal higher education funds. Community college spokesmen must make a more persuasive case than they so far have for more adequate funding.

In this regard, K. Patricia Cross has written, "The tough problem is not in identifying winners; it is in making winners out of ordinary people. That, after all, is the overwhelming purpose of education. Yet, historically, in most of the periods emphasizing excellence, education has reverted to selecting winners rather than creating them" (1984). More than any other segment of higher education, community colleges, with their open admissions policies and their programs of remediation and English as a Second Language, have confronted this responsibility of creating winners rather than merely selecting them. By meeting their current challenges of responding to shifting student enrollment patterns, expanding the diversity of their faculty and staff, and finding additional funding sources, two-year institutions will increasingly serve as exciting teaching and learning centers that achieve the overarching purpose of education: "making winners out of ordinary people."

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